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SUBJECT: GABON AFTER PRESIDENT OMAR BONGO

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Classified By: Charge d'affaires Nathan Holt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Gabonese President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba, Africa's longest-serving head of state, is gravely ill. Following is Embassy Libreville's analysis of the prospects for succession and stability in Gabon, and the likely impact on U.S. interests. End Summary.

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Short Term Prospects: Illness and Uncertainty  
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¶2. (C) Bongo, in power since 1967, is sick, probably with cancer, and is currently thought to be receiving treatment at an undisclosed European location. He may not live much longer. Even if he lives it is clear that Bongo's physical capacities will be much diminished. In addition to suspected cancer, Bongo is said to suffer from diabetes, and to be seriously depressed after the March 14 death of his much younger wife, Edith Lucie, in Morocco after a protracted illness.

¶3. (C) The system Bongo created to govern Gabon, and the role Bongo and Gabon play in regional and continental politics, are changing quickly. The risk of instability in Gabon, where Bongo is respected and feared but not much loved, is rising. The most likely scenario in the event of the president's death, however, is that his son and heir-apparent, Defense Minister Ali Bongo Ondimba, will take over after a period of mourning and at least formal respect for constitutional and electoral requirements. With direct or indirect control over the security forces, Ali Bongo can probably squelch potential unrest and tilt the outcome decisively in his favor.

¶4. (C) Smart and ruthless, Ali Bongo lacks his father's talent for building alliances. There will be both overt and covert challenges to his rise from political opponents and from inside his powerful family. Ali Bongo's success will ultimately depend on his political skill and the loyalty of Gabon's security forces. Should Ali's grip weaken, it is far from clear what other figure--from the current ruling elite, from the fractured political opposition, or from the shadowy ranks of the armed forces--would emerge to claim the presidency. And in those circumstances the transition could be significantly rockier.

¶5. (C) It is also possible that President Bongo will enter a period of prolonged incapacity and decline. This too could be destabilizing, as the courtiers whom Bongo scornfully refers to as "little kings" scramble for influence, and to

line their own pockets. Gabon's population, pinched by rising prices and deteriorating social services, has little regard for any of the current players, but would likely reward any leader who delivers better roads, health care, jobs and education.

¶6. (C) Gabon after Bongo will be less stable, at least in the short term, as a new leader moves to consolidate power. Gabon would likely retain its openness to the United States and China, and its close ties to France. Both France and Gabon, however, may seek to adjust their relationship, or at least cast it in a more favorable public light. Gabon's role in regional and continental politics, anchored by President Bongo's seniority and wily leadership, will diminish. However, Gabon will retain influence through African Union chairman Jean Ping, a former long-serving Gabonese foreign minister, and through the regional security initiatives of the Libreville-based Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS, or CEEAC in French).

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Bongo in Retrospect: A Quick Rise  
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¶7. (C) To understand the consequences of Bongo's passing from power, it is first necessary to take a close look at the domestic and international impact of this flawed but remarkable leader.

¶8. (C) Bongo was born into the minority Bateke ethnic group in a remote corner of what was then French Equatorial Africa, reportedly in 1935. Orphaned at an early age, Bongo found schooling in Brazzaville, and through luck, brains and hard work emerged as a figure in the ferment of the era's labor and independence politics. He was also, and not

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coincidentally, employed by a French intelligence service. With Gabon's independence in 1960, Bongo rose to become aide-de-camp to first president Leon Mba. Sticking by Mba during an attempted coup, in which he was briefly imprisoned by Mba's opponents and rescued by the French, Bongo was rewarded with the vice presidency. Mba died in France in 1967 and Bongo took office at the announced age of 31--though his actual age remains uncertain even to this day.

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Domestic Politics: Keeping Friends  
Close and Enemies Closer  
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¶8. (C) Pragmatic, cynical, flush with oil revenue, hard working, fiercely intelligent and by any standard highly corrupt, Bongo brought his country peace and a measure of prosperity. He also soon proved himself a master of domestic and regional politics.

¶9. (C) Less than a year into his presidency, Bongo made Gabon a one-party state. Within the ruling Parti Democratique Gabonais (PDG), however, Bongo deftly balanced ethnic and regional interests, dispensing money and patronage to local "barons" and consolidating his control. From his earliest days in power and throughout his career, Bongo has been particularly adept at dividing and neutralizing the Fang, Gabon's largest ethnic group (with about 30 percent of the population). Carefully maintaining an alliance with the family of former President Leon Mba, an ethnic Fang, Bongo ensured that generations of Fang politicians got enough power and benefits to keep them placated, but not enough to pose a serious challenge to his regime. Other groups were handled with similar skill. Though he did not hesitate to jail political opponents, Bongo showed an early preference for carrots over sticks in domestic politics, and with an oil boom that began in the 1970s he had many carrots to dispense.

¶10. (C) Bongo successfully weathered the most serious challenge to his presidency during the wave of protest, constitutional reform and democratization that swept Africa in the early 1990s. Bongo reintroduced multi-party politics, granted freedom of the press--and by many accounts stole the 1993 election against former Roman Catholic priest Paul Mba Abessole. Scores died in post-election rioting, but Bongo's control was never seriously in doubt. Today, Mba Abessole is a well-paid deputy prime minister and a half-dozen former opposition leaders are in cabinet, their various parties subsumed and almost indistinguishable in the PDG's parliamentary and electoral coalition. One exception is Pierre Mamboundou, who took refuge in the South African Embassy citing fears for his personal safety after losing the 2005 presidential election with about 14 percent of the vote. Mamboundou, who still asserts there are plots against him, is widely known to have negotiated with Bongo for a senior post in government, but has so far been unable to strike a deal.

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International Politics: There's France, and  
Then There's Everyone Else  
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¶11. (C) Bongo also pursued a sophisticated international agenda. Siding with the West during the Cold War, Bongo assiduously sought a closer relationship with the United States, particularly at the presidential level. Overcoming French-fueled suspicion of U.S. involvement in the 1964 anti-Mba coup and other early episodes, he opened the door to U.S. investment in the oil sector and met with U.S. presidents from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush. More recently, Bongo has strengthened economic and military ties to China, signing a \$3.6 billion 25-year deal to develop iron resources in eastern Gabon and associated infrastructure.

¶12. (C) Bongo's links to France, however, were and remain of another order entirely. An astute judge of French politics and politicians, Bongo facilitated billions of dollars of French trade and investment in Gabon, including the notorious activities of the now-dissolved oil company Elf Aquitaine. He also secured for Gabon one of four French military bases in Africa and, from the outset of his rule, a guarantee of French support should his regime be challenged. Sometimes mislabeled a French puppet, Bongo grew over time into a sophisticated partner in French diplomatic, military and business initiatives and an independent voice whose counsel was valued at the senior levels in Paris.

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Regional Peacemaker  
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¶13. (C) Bongo's most lasting achievement, however, was his role as a regional peacemaker and power broker. With seniority among fellow African leaders and significant financial resources, Bongo brought tenacity, credibility and an undeniable gift for deal-making to dozens of efforts to end war and civil conflict. In matters as diverse as Angola's civil war, Cote d'Ivoire's various coups and electoral crises in the last decade, and current efforts to end low-level conflict and forge a new political order in the Central African Republic (CAR), Bongo has been a consistent, respected advocate of compromise and peace. Never an ideologue, Bongo managed to play these roles despite well-known deviations from African political orthodoxy: facilitating arms transfers to UNITA rebels in Angola, trading with South Africa throughout the era of apartheid, and forging an unusually close relationship with Morocco despite AU distress over Western Sahara.

¶14. (C) Privately dismissive of several fellow heads of state, and particularly appalled by the pretensions of

Libya's Muamar Qadhafi, Bongo nevertheless wields his seniority with a light touch. Aides speak of Bongo's disarming humility, careful respect for the egos and sensitivities of fellow leaders, and readiness to cede the limelight--all the while privately prodding even intractable foes toward negotiation and compromise. The election of Gabonese Foreign Minister Jean Ping to the chairmanship of the African Union in 2008, with two-thirds of the vote on the first ballot, was unquestionably a tribute to Ping's extraordinary acumen. It was also a result of Bongo's effective lobbying and the political capital he accumulated over four decades in power.

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Challenges for a Successor  
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¶15. (C) For all his skills, however, Bongo leaves a Gabon beset by pressing problems that will make it considerably more difficult for Gabon's next president to consolidate power and govern. Gabon's oil production has declined significantly from its peak in the mid-1990s, and a chokehold of corruption and monopolies, centered on the Bongo family, thwart genuine competition and much-needed economic diversification. Unemployment is rising. Popular confidence in government, and in electoral politics, is worrisomely low. As Gabon's powerful unions press for concessions in the oil, education and health sectors, finance ministry officials and IMF advisors fret that the shrinking national budget cannot accommodate their demands. Meanwhile, the quality of schools, hospitals and roads deteriorates despite what on paper appear to be massive public investments.

¶16. (C) France, for many years a guarantor of Bongo's rule, may be unwilling to play that role for a successor--though with 850 troops based in Gabon, France will at minimum respond to any threat to the safety of the estimated 10,000 French citizens here. France is thought to be re-evaluating its need for a Gabonese military base, and redefining its security cooperation with Gabon, consistent with a 2008 defense white paper. Gabon's prolonged courtship of the United States, and its more recent economic and military overtures to China, provide no comparable or counterbalancing security guarantees. And while Gabon does not expect interference in its succession process by neighboring states, a welter of overlapping ethnicities and political connections ensure that such interference cannot be ruled out.

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Mechanics of Succession  
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¶17. (C) How, then, will succession play out? The constitutional mechanics are fairly straightforward, though few expect the script to be followed precisely. Should President Bongo die, power passes to the President of the Senate, who then has between 30 and 45 days to organize an election. The current incumbent is a recently-installed, little-known politician named Rose Francine Rogombe, chosen specifically for her perceived pliability.

¶18. (C) More complex, and potentially more important, are the mechanics of succession to the presidency of the ruling PDG--a post currently held by Omar Bongo. The PDG has never lost an election and it is widely assumed that whoever succeeds Omar Bongo to the PDG presidency will, fairly or otherwise, win any ensuing national election. As currently constituted the PDG has seven vice presidents, including Ali Bongo. Four vice presidents, including the prime minister and the president of the Senate, hold office by virtue of their position in national government. Ali Bongo is one of three vice-presidents directly elected at the last party congress. He also chairs the party's security council.

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Party insiders say that in the event of a vacancy, several

vice presidents will be disqualified because of their duties in national government. Based on these rather arcane rules, and backroom deals involving Ali and other power brokers, insiders predict that Ali would be the one of two or three vice presidents eligible, and the only one selected, to head the party. As the PDG standard bearer, he will then be the heavy favorite to win the election.

¶19. (C) Finally, there is the question of succession in the event of the president's incapacity. Here the rules are also complex. The constitution requires that either an absolute majority of cabinet ministers, or an absolute majority of the two houses of the national legislature (Senate and National Assembly) sitting together as one body, seek a final and binding judgment from the Constitutional Court declaring the president incapable of governing. At that point the same process unfolds as if the president had died, with elections organized by the President of the Senate no more than 45 days later.

¶20. (C) There are rumors that Ali Bongo and his allies are considering changing the constitution to avoid the requirement of an election within a few weeks of the president's death. They propose instead that the next head of state be elected by the Senate or National Assembly. Most say that the president's illness makes it unlikely that such a proposal would be brought forward now.

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The Heir Apparent . . .  
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¶21. (C) 50-year old Defense Minister Ali Bongo spent much of his youth and early adulthood abroad in France and the United States, where he dabbled in music promotion. Although he was an unlikely prospect to succeed his father when he returned to Gabon in the late 1980s, his subsequent ascent has been extraordinarily rapid. Ali served as foreign minister (1989-91) and since 1999 as minister of defense. Ali Bongo also deputizes for his father as head of Gabon's Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and, like his father and much of Gabon's political elite, is a member of an influential Masonic lodge. And in a clear break with the past practice of the Omar Bongo regime, all security forces, including the elite Republican Guard, have since 2008 been headed by individuals believed to be allies of a single person--Ali Bongo.

¶22. (C) A comfortable, persuasive interlocutor with foreigners, Ali Bongo nevertheless affects exasperation with France--and behind his back, officials at the French Embassy in Libreville say little positive about Ali. Ali Bongo can also be awkward among fellow Gabonese politicians, some of whom complain that he is gruff and distant. Though arguably less venal than some fellow family members, Ali Bongo has inherited the family predilection for fancy cars and other emblems of conspicuous wealth. Observers across the political spectrum nevertheless give him credit for skillful maneuvering in the succession contest. A self-described reformer, Ali Bongo has also cultivated a cadre of younger, reform-minded political "renovators" who have sought with mixed success to modernize the PDG and the government.

¶23. (C) Ali Bongo's most important constituency, and the key to his ability to claim the presidency, is the security forces. As defense minister, Bongo oversaw significant improvements in the pay, housing, equipment, training and other benefits for the army, navy, air force, Republican Guard and paramilitary gendarmerie. A political ally, Interior Minister Andre Mba Obame, oversees the National Police, who have not been as heavily favored. While Bongo has succeeded in placing key allies in senior positions in various security forces--many of them ethnic Teke and a few of them his relatives--he may have done so at the cost of creating real but hidden frustration among non-Teke officers and enlisted personnel. In any case, several of the senior officers sidelined or retired as Ali Bongo consolidated control bear ill feelings toward him, and retain at least



residual influence in the armed forces.

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. . . And His Rivals  
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¶24. (C) Despite Ali Bongo's rapid ascent, his path to the presidency is not straightforward; nor has he been formally anointed by either his father or his party. Ali Bongo's most formidable obstacles may come from his own family and Bateke ethnic group. Ali's half-sister Pascaline is the president's powerful chief of staff and key gatekeeper; she is also the only one of Bongo's dozens of children who regularly travels with the president, and is thought to be with him now in

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Europe. Relations between Ali and Pascaline Bongo are said to be fraught, and Ali readily admits that he has struggled against his sister's long-time consort, Foreign Minister Paul Toungui, for leadership of the PDG. Pascaline Bongo either controls or arbitrates the financial and business dealings of various siblings and family members, and together with Toungui (finance minister from 2002 to 2008) has great influence over government contracting and finances.

¶25. (C) In the wake of President Bongo's current illness, a family council is said to have decreed that Pascaline would take care of the family and its money, while Ali would ensure the security of the state during President Bongo's illness and ultimately ascend to the presidency. It is not clear, however, whether these arrangements will last. Some family members may also be behind rumors that Ali Bongo is a Biafran orphan adopted by his parents in the mid-1960s--apparently specious rumors that both Ali Bongo and his mother, a popular Gabonese singer, have felt compelled to publicly refute.

¶26. (C) Until very recently, political struggles within the PDG could be analyzed in terms of Ali Bongo's "renovators", a group of moderates or "appellists" centered around Toungui, and aging but influential party barons known as the "caciques". Increasingly, however, Gabonese politics are defined by whether one is for or against Ali Bongo. Even without an obvious alternative to rally around, ordinary citizens and senior officials object to the creation of what some now openly call a monarchy. It is possible, though increasingly unlikely, that a group within the PDG could mount a successful challenge to Ali Bongo. The current Prime Minister, Jean Eyeghe Ndong, has little independent political clout, but could be a compromise figure; Vice President Didjob Divungui Di Ndingue has only minimal constitutional authority, little political influence, and in any case is not a member of the PDG. Another PDG dark horse, whose stature may grow if President Bongo lingers longer in office, is AU chairman Jean Ping. Throughout his long career, however, Ping's domestic political influence has been minimal.

¶27. (C) Outside the PDG, Ali Bongo would likely face an electoral challenge from Paul Mba Abessole, the vice-prime minister and leader of the opposition Rassemblement Pour le Gabon (RPG), who has not ruled out another contest for the presidency. Mba Abessole is an ethnic Fang, as are almost all of his key advisors. Another contender, perhaps more acceptable to the current elite, is Pierre Mamboundou, leader of the Union Pour le Gabon (RPG), who placed second in the last presidential election. Neither figure is believed to have the popularity or organizational base to thwart a determined PDG candidate, particularly if that candidate is Ali Bongo.

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Alternative Scenarios  
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¶28. (C) The death of President Omar Bongo would result in an immediate and intense period of national mourning, which would also provide cover for a de facto clampdown on

demonstrations and other dissent by security forces under the control of Minister of Defense Ali Bongo. Should Bongo's grip on the security forces slip, or should he stumble the complex succession process, there would be a genuine and unpredictable scramble for power among various aspirants. With Ali Bongo sidelined, it is far from clear whether the constitutional court, senate president, electoral commission and other individuals and institutions charged with overseeing the succession process could withstand external or extra-constitutional pressures. Here, too, the attitude of the security forces would be determinant. Those who know him predict that Ali Bongo would not hesitate to use forces loyal to him to secure control.

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Gabon After Omar Bongo:  
Stability and U.S. Interests  
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¶29. (C) Gabon after Omar Bongo will likely remain open to closer military and economic ties to both the United States and China. Although France will remain Gabon's major external partner, both sides may take the opportunity to recalibrate at least the public perception of their relationship--particularly in view of the ongoing campaign in French courts by anti-corruption organizations against Bongo's ill-gotten wealth. Gabon will play a diminished, but potentially still significant, role in regional and continental politics and security initiatives.

¶30. (C) Gabon's next leader will need to move quickly to consolidate power, and Gabon will remain vulnerable to instability until he or she does so. Establishing and

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reinforcing civilian control over the security forces will be the key first step. In the end, however, the next president's leadership will be best secured by providing better social services, jobs and economic opportunity to a restive and disenchanted populace.

¶31. (C) There is no reason why the next leader of Gabon could not clamp down on corruption; encourage genuine economic competition and diversification; sustain renewed and sensible relationships with France, China and the United States; and remain a positive force for regional stability through skillful diplomacy, participation in peacekeeping missions, and support for regional organizations like CEEAC. We should encourage these policies, along with respect for the constitution by all players in the current succession process--and most importantly, by the security forces.

¶32. (C) In any case, no matter how much longer President Bongo remains in office, the post-Bongo era has probably begun.  
HOLT